

LINCOLN AND WHITMAN

Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington

Daniel Mark Epstein



R A N D O M H O U S E

*Lincoln
and Whitman*

PARALLEL LIVES *in* CIVIL WAR WASHINGTON



DANIEL MARK EPSTEIN



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For Neil Olson

PRAISE FOR *Lincoln and Whitman*

“A revealing character study.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Deftly written and carefully researched, this book uncovers fresh and often surprising connections between America’s greatest poet and its greatest statesman. Daniel Mark Epstein reveals a political side to Whitman and a literary side to Lincoln, finding new subtleties of character and skill in each of these towering figures. Along the way, he re-creates nineteenth-century life in fascinating ways.”

—David S. Reynolds,
author of *Walt Whitman’s America* and *Beneath the American Renaissance*

“Epstein presents a compelling affinity of ideas.”

—*Newsday*

“Epstein offers a revealing character study of Whitman and a penetrating analysis of his wartime poetry. . . . [He] expertly paints the worlds in which Whitman moved, from Pfaff’s saloon, where the poet enjoyed the bohemian camaraderie of the New York literati, to the military hospitals in Washington where he tended wounded soldiers.”

—*The Ann Arbor News*

“Powerful and evocative.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Epstein has yoked Lincoln and Whitman in a detailed narrative sure to please the vast audience both men justly command. The book is a fine combination of biography, history, and literary criticism with several quirky excursions into the mysteries of the two men’s lives and loves.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“An illuminating, elegant book. The scholarship is excellent, the ideas provocative, and the writing simply sublime. Both Lincoln and Whitman—together with the long-vanished culture in which they lived—come vividly, sometimes startlingly, alive in Daniel Mark Epstein’s luminous prose.”

—Harold Holzer,
author of *The Lincoln Image*

“Cuts back and forth as compellingly as a good novel between evocative accounts of each man. The

book places its two subjects in a uniquely sharp perspective.”

—*The Burlington Free Press*

“Epstein memorably evokes the look and feel of Washington during the Civil War, the eerily adjacent lives there of Walt Whitman and Abraham Lincoln, and the frantic events that issued in the murder of our greatest president and the writing of our greatest poem, ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.’ Combining biography and history, his ingeniously constructed double narrative of personal development and national tragedy radiates humor, wonderment, and terror.”

—Kenneth Silverman,
author of *Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse*

PREFACE

Two visionaries, Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman, dominated the American scene from 1850 until 1865 in their respective fields of politics and literature. Their works, unique but analogous, have continued to affect our lives and thoughts, down to the present generation.

Therefore, any influence of the one genius upon the other and the slightest personal encounter between them have been subjects of intense scholarly and public interest since October 1865, when Whitman published his elegy for the President, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” In 1875 Whitman brought out his *Memoranda During the War*, which included his detailed recollections of Lincoln. And in February 1876, in the *New York Sun*, Whitman published an account of the assassination in Ford’s Theatre, which he expanded into a lecture incorporating his personal memories of Lincoln. Whitman’s delivery of that speech a dozen times between 1879 and 1890 forged an unbreakable link between the President and the poet in the public mind. This book reexamines the actual connection.

The present narrative begins in a dusty law office in 1857, where Lincoln was first heard reading aloud from *Leaves of Grass*, and it ends in a “jewel box” theater in 1887, where Whitman delivered his Lincoln lecture to an audience that included Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and General and Mrs. William Tecumseh Sherman. But the story has deeper roots in the political turmoil of the 1850s.

During this decade when Abraham Lincoln became a power in national politics, and Walt Whitman was changing the medium of poetry by writing and publishing *Leaves of Grass*, America was rushing toward civil war with a momentum horrifying to those who were aware that war was inevitable, and unsettling to others who believed that the calamity might be avoided. There was hardly a facet of civic or political life that was not affected by the controversy over slavery. The failure to ban slavery from the territories inspired Whitman to write and publish his first free-verse poem, “Blood Money,” in 1850. In 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a fictional critique of the “peculiar institution.” It sold three million copies, and abolition became an unavoidable topic of conversation.

In those days, most people agreed that a transcontinental railroad would be the nation’s best investment, since the frontier had reached the west coast. But whether the track would be laid along a northern or a southern route was a hotly debated question, in which the rivalry between the slaveholders and the free-soilers insinuated itself. The railroad would give economic advantage to the section it crossed, and it would decisively influence the politics of the yet unformed West. In 1853 the Pierce administration showed its intention to route the railroad south, from New Orleans to San Diego by purchasing from Mexico a strip of land along the Gila River (the Gadsden Purchase). Northerners favoring a route from Chicago or St. Louis to San Francisco would have to act swiftly and forcefully. If the northern route was chosen, a long stretch of track needed to pass through the Great Plains—Indian country west of the Missouri River—which had not yet been received into the Union. Whether

slavery would be legal in the territories depended entirely upon congressional legislation.

In the thick of this fateful controversy toiled a highly ambitious, leonine, charismatic orator from Illinois, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the Little Giant. As chairman of the Committee on Territories, the forty-year-old presidential hopeful had shaped policy in the West. It was Douglas's contribution to the Great Compromise of 1850 that the territorial governments of Utah and New Mexico were given the power to decide the slavery question for themselves, by voting on it. Thus to the vexed question of slavery's future came the concept of "popular sovereignty." This idea was loathsome to patriots like Abraham Lincoln, who believed the Founding Fathers and the Constitution itself were fundamental and opposed to the spread of slavery.

Douglas had his dreams and ambitions, and he also held railroad investments. As an Illinois Democrat, he was expected to advance the St. Louis and Chicago interests in the northern route. This required an organization of the Nebraska Territory, which Douglas contrived to accomplish by a bill introduced on January 4, 1854. Trusting that what worked for Utah and New Mexico would suit the Great Plains, Douglas put together a bill that provided that Nebraska (and Kansas) would be accepted into the Union *with or without slavery*, as its constitution, yet to be written, might allow.

No one has ever quite understood why Douglas—who was in many ways a worthy statesman, and by no means an advocate or apologist for slavery—took the spectacularly bold position he did in early 1854, abandoning the slavery question to the legislatures of unformed states. This is not the place to repeat Douglas's arguments, famously dashed by Lincoln. The Senator's actions may be attributed to political expedience: by allowing slaveholders the hope of taking their slaves west, he briefly gained popularity among Southern Democrats and support for the northern railroad route. Yet there is a more illuminating determinant, one that casts increasing light as Lincoln emerges from obscurity to oppose the Little Giant. Douglas lacked a guiding moral principle, a sense of vision. This put him at a severe disadvantage in debate against the political visionary who would topple him, Abraham Lincoln.

The drafted bill was illegal, as it violated the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which outlawed slavery north of the 36°30' latitude. When colleagues pointed this out, Douglas irrationally explained that a careless clerk had left out the section of the bill referring questions concerning slavery to the territory's residents, i.e., to "popular sovereignty." Southern lawmakers complained that as long as the Missouri Compromise held sway the residents could not vote for slavery even if they wanted it, so Douglas obligingly added two amendments to the bill. First, the 36°30' provision of the Missouri Compromise was to be repealed. Second, the area was to be split into two territories, Kansas and Nebraska, the southernmost of which, Kansas, seemed favored to become a slave state.

Abolitionists and liberal Yankees were enraged. Lincoln later said, "We were thunderstruck and stunned." Prominent liberal senators Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Salmon Portland Chase of Ohio tried to rally the public against the outrageous bill by issuing the exposé "Appeal of the Independent Democrats" on January 24, before the legislation was passed. It decried "a gross violation of a sacred pledge . . . a criminal betrayal of precious rights." These protesters were no match for the ferocious Douglas, the Southern Democrats, and the charming President Franklin Pierce. Although Douglas was burned in effigy from Maine to Wisconsin, and some women in Ohio solemnly awarded this latter-day Judas thirty pieces of silver, the bill became law, and American politics were changed forever. The simmer of abolitionism came to a boil. The Whig Party (to which Lincoln had belonged

lost its vestiges of relevance and soon vanished. The Democratic Party cracked wide open, sundered by the slavery dispute. Editor Horace Greeley called for the formation of a new antislavery party in his *New-York Tribune* on June 15. And that autumn, the fledgling party he called “Republican” won seats in the U.S. Congress and captured the legislatures of seven Northern states.

The concentration of Republicans in the industrial North, united by the single cause of free soil, hastened the slide of the Democratic Party into the agrarian culture of the South. The party system became sectionalized.

Popular sovereignty, which Stephen Douglas argued was the obvious solution to the devilish question of allowing settlers to decide for or against slavery—in the American way—by voting, turned out to be a ticking bomb.

William Seward of New York rose up in the Senate in righteous defiance. “Come on then, Gentlemen of the slave States; since there is no escaping your challenge, I accept it in behalf of the cause of freedom. We will engage in competition for the virgin soil of Kansas, and God give the victory to the side which is stronger in numbers as it is in right.” Fellow New Yorker Walt Whitman greatly admired Seward for his defense of freedom.

The competition rapidly escalated from a war of words and ballots to one of guns and swords. By 1855 there were two governments in Kansas, one proslavery, the other Free State. In May 1856 the proslavery government sent a gang to cannonade the free-soil town of Lawrence, Kansas. The men wrecked the presses of the *Herald of Freedom*, burned down the Free State Hotel, and looted some shops. A few days later, fifty-six-year-old John Brown, with his four sons and two other men, set out to avenge the “sack of Lawrence.” Believing himself to be an instrument of God’s wrath, the abolitionist led his band against a proslavery settlement on Pottawatomie Creek. They broke into three cabins, hacked five men to pieces with broadswords, and stole their horses.

Sentiments in the nation’s capital ran so high that congressmen began carrying pistols. On May 19 and 20, 1856, Charles Sumner delivered his speech on “the Crime against Kansas,” a blistering indictment that not only censured the legislation that had led to “Bleeding Kansas” but took aim at Stephen Douglas and Senator Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina. The sharp-tongued Sumner ridiculed Butler for his affection for his “mistress . . . the harlot slavery”; in those bitter times this was taken as a slap against the Southern gentleman’s character. Two days later, as Senator Sumner sat alone, working at his desk after hours in the Senate chamber, a congressman from South Carolina, Butler’s nephew Preston Brooks, approached Sumner and rebuked him for his insults against Butler. Not satisfied with the conversation, Brooks cracked Sumner’s skull with a gutta-percha cane. As Sumner turned and raised his arms in defense Brooks continued to rain blows upon his victim’s head and spine until the weapon broke into pieces. His passion spent, Brooks turned and left Sumner lying in his own blood, nearly dead on the floor of the great hall.

Charles Sumner, the most powerful voice against slavery in Washington, was so critically wounded that he could not return to his seat until 1859. His empty desk in the Senate became a symbol of the conflict that words could not mediate. Civil war had broken out in Kansas, and there was internecine combat between Northern and Southern lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

This, then, is the America in which Walt Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* and Abraham Lincoln sought his voice in the tumultuous discourse that was reshaping party politics. This is the troubled decade in which our story begins.





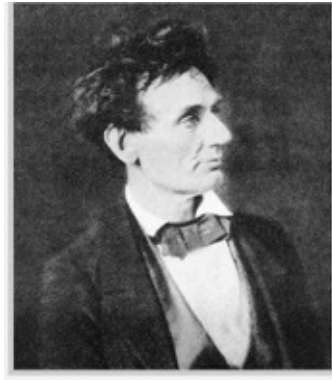
PLAN OF THE CITY
OF
WASHINGTON.
The **CAPITOL** of the
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Scale of 1 Mile



part one

DISCOVERIES AND INVENTIONS



SPRINGFIELD, 1857

Abraham Lincoln's law partner William "Billy" Herndon, thirty-nine, loved the birds and wildflowers of the prairie, pretty women, and corn liquor. He also had an immoderate passion for new books, and for the transcendental philosophizing of pastor Theodore Parker and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. By his own accounting he had spent four thousand dollars on his collection of poetry, philosophy, and belles lettres—a fortune in those days, when a good wood-frame house in Springfield, Illinois, cost half as much. Journalist George Alfred Townsend called Herndon's library the finest in the West.

Herndon's narrow, earnest-looking face was fringed with whiskers in the Scots manner, and his eyes were close-set, intense. His favorite philosopher-poet was Emerson. Herndon so admired the Sage of Concord that he purchased Emerson's books by the carton and gave them away to friends and strangers with the zeal of an evangelist. A backwoods philosopher, Herndon even solicited Emerson's endorsement for his tract "Some Hints on the Mind," in which he claimed to have discovered the mind's fundamental principle, "if not its law."

So when Emerson espoused a new book of poetry, calling it "the most extraordinary piece of wisdom and wisdom that America has yet contributed," Herndon wasted no time in locating a copy, which could be found on the shelves of R. Blanchard's, Booksellers, in Chicago, where he frequently traveled on business.

Having held the olive-green book, its cover blind-stamped with leaves and berries; having regarded with a twinge of envy the salutation "I Greet You at the / Beginning of A / Great Career / R W Emerson," gold-stamped on the spine, the bibliophile-lawyer plunked down his golden dollar for the second edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. And knowing the storm the book had caused in more sophisticated circles, Herndon brought the brickbat-shaped volume to the office he shared with Lincoln and set it in clear view on the table, where anyone might pick up the book and thumb through it. *Leaves of Grass* was exactly the length of a man's hand. He laid it down on the baize-covered table with the complacency of an anarchist waiting for a bomb to explode.

The Lincoln-Herndon law office was on the second floor of a brick building on the west side of Springfield's main square, across from the courthouse. Visitors mounted a flight of stairs and passed down a dark hallway to a medium-sized room in the rear of the building. The upper half of the door had a pane of beveled glass, with a curtain hanging from a wire, on brass rings. Lincoln would unlock the door, open it, and draw the curtain as he closed the door behind him. Two dusty windows overlooked the alley.

Herndon's biographer David Donald describes the office as "a center of political activity, of gossip and friendly banter, and of such remote problems as the merits of Walt Whitman's poetry."

The office was untidy and cobwebbed. Once, after Lincoln had come home from Congress with the customary dole of seeds to distribute to farmers, John Littlefield, a law student, discovered while sweeping that some of the stray wheat seeds had sprouted in the cracks between the floorboards. A long pine table that divided the room, and met with a shorter table to make a T, was scored by the jackknives of absent-minded clerks and clients. In one corner stood a secretary desk, its many pigeonholes and drawers stuffed with letters and memoranda, its besieged surface sustaining a spattered earthenware inkwell and a few gold pens. Bookcases rose between the tall windows. A spidery black stain blotted one wall, at the height of a man's head, where an ink bottle had exploded—the memento, according to Lincoln, of a disagreement between law students over a point of jurisprudence that would not yield to cold logic.

Papers were strewn everywhere, as if by a prairie wind: on the table, on the floor, on the five scattered cane-bottomed chairs and the ragged sofa where the senior partner of the firm liked to stretch out his full length, his head on the arm of the sofa. His legs were too long to fit the settee, so Lincoln would rest his feet on the raveling cane seat of a chair. There he reclined every morning, after arriving at nine, clean-shaven. And he would read, aloud. He read newspapers and books, always aloud, much to the annoyance of his partner, who found the high, tuneful voice, with its chuckling interludes and asides, a distraction from the warrants and writs and invoices. Herndon once asked Lincoln why he had to read aloud, and the forty-eight-year-old ex-Congressman explained: “Two senses catch the idea: first I see what I read; second I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better.” Lincoln—not boasting—said that his mind was like steel: the gray matter was difficult to scratch, but once engraved on it, information was nearly impossible to efface. According to Herndon, Lincoln did not read many books, but whatever he did read he absorbed completely.

The law students got to Whitman first. Perhaps they had read about *Leaves of Grass* in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, where the eminent Charles Eliot Norton had announced that words “banished from polite society are here employed without reserve” and called the book a curious mixture of “Yankee Transcendentalism and New York rowdyism”; or they might have caught notice of it in the *New York Criterion*, where the dyspeptic Rufus Griswold referred to it as “this gathering of muck.” In America's most influential literary journal, the *North American Review*, Edward Everett Hale rhapsodized about *Leaves of Grass*. And in May 1856 no less an authority than Fanny Fern—the highest-paid columnist in the country—referred to Whitman in the *New York Ledger* as “this glorious Native American.” The book was widely praised and condemned, much discussed, if not much purchased or read.

According to Henry Bascom Rankin, who was a student in the Lincoln-Herndon office in 1855, “discussions hot and extreme sprung up between office students and Mr. Herndon concerning its poetic merit.” A few verses:

*I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning,
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart . . .*

*I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.*

Poetry indeed! These long, racy, unrhymed verses did not look like any poetry the provincial law students had ever seen, no matter what Emerson or the bluestocking Fanny Fern wrote.

The talk of Whitman that animated the law office during the unseasonably warm spring of 1850 relieved the furious, anguished discussion of the Supreme Court's recent decision about Dred Scott, which aroused Lincoln from a spell of political torpor. Yet even Scott's fate led them back to *Leaves of Grass*:

*I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinned with the ooze of my skin . . .*

The argument over Whitman did not differ much in Springfield from the dispute in Boston and New York. Was this poetry? Then there arose the livelier controversy over the book's brazen immodesty. Was *Leaves of Grass* indecent? Many of the verses sounded shameless, unfit for mixed company. Take for example the anonymous woman watching twenty-eight young men bathing by the shore, who comes "Dancing and laughing along the beach" to caress their naked bellies:

*They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.*

Was this Walt Whitman actually depicting a sexual act outlawed everywhere but in the debater's dreams? It was shocking, pornographic. The men wondered whether such a book should be allowed on library shelves, or in homes where women and children might casually be seduced by it. Who was responsible for the corruption of morals: the author, the printer, the Chicago bookseller, or buyers of *Leaves of Grass* like Billy Herndon?

The students wrangled, and read the poems aloud, with Herndon sometimes acting as Whitman's advocate, other times as an impartial referee. Visitors dropping by, such as Dr. Newton Bateman, superintendent of schools, would join in the discussion provoked by lines such as:

*A woman waits for me—she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the
right man were lacking.*

Lincoln worked quietly at his desk, raking his coarse hair with his long fingers, or he came and

went, apparently oblivious to the disturbance the new book was causing in the workplace. Having lost a year to politics, stumping for the Republican John Frémont during the presidential campaign of 1856, advocating “free soil, free labor and free men,” he had a lot of catching up to do in his neglected law practice. He was also having a spell of depression, “the hypochondria,” as it was called in those days. This mood afflicted him periodically, often between periods of intense business or creative work. So he turned his back on the students, and Herndon and Dr. Bateman, as they challenged one another’s taste in literature and questioned one another’s morals, reading passages of *Leaves of Grass* and attacking or defending Whitman as the spirit, or the letter, moved them. The poet was utterly uninhibited, whether he was describing himself, or addressing the President:

*Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,
Disorderly, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, breeding,*

*No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women, or apart from
them—no more modest than immodest*

...

*I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart
of on the same terms.*

Have you outstript the rest? Are you the President?

*It is a trifle—they will more than arrive there every one, and still
pass on.*

One day, after the debaters had departed, a few clerks, including Henry Rankin, remained, copying documents. Lincoln rose from his desk. This was always a sight because sitting down Lincoln appeared to be of average height, but his limbs were so disproportionately long that when he unfolded and stretched them it was as if a giant had sprung up out of a common man.

“Quite a surprise occurred,” Rankin recalled, in a memoir written years later. Lincoln picked up the book of poems that had been disturbing the peace and began to read, as he rarely did, in devoted silence, for more than half an hour by the Regulator clock. When the pressure of perusing the poet silently became more than Lincoln could endure, he thumbed back to the first pages of *Leaves of Grass* and began reading aloud, in that tenderly expressive voice with the Kentucky accent and a continual undercurrent of whimsical humor.

*I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.*

The light of afternoon streamed through the office windows, gilding the dust motes.

*Houses and rooms are full of perfumes—the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.*

*The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood, and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.*

*The smoke of my own breath,
Echos, ripples, buzzed whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch, vine
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart . . .*

“His rendering,” Rankin remembered, “revealed a charm of new life in Whitman’s versification. Here and there Lincoln found a verse too coarse, a line or phrase he felt the poet might have avoided. But on the whole he “commended the new poet’s verses for their virility, freshness, unconventional sentiments, and unique forms of expression.”


Lincoln put the book back down on the office table, desiring Herndon to leave Whitman there where he might not get lost in the tide of books, newspapers, and documents. “Time and again, when Lincoln came in, or was leaving, he would pick it up, as if to glance at it for only a moment, but instead he would often settle down in a chair and never stop reading aloud such verses or pages as he fancied.”

Once Lincoln made the mistake of taking *Leaves of Grass* home. The next morning he brought the book back, grimly remarking that he “had barely saved it from being purified in fire by the women.” This anecdote goes a long way toward explaining the politician’s lifelong reticence about the poet and his book. Of course, by “the women” he meant his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, who controlled nearly everything that went on inside the big, two-story house at the corner of Eighth and Jackson where they lived with their three boys.

It is uncertain what verses or pages Lincoln fancied. The feuds among Lincoln’s early biographers struggling over the soul of the martyred President, have few parallels in American letters. In 1928

rival biographer, Reverend William E. Barton, in a popular book that took pains to disassociate Lincoln from Whitman, challenged Rankin's memory. As early as 1932, however, the scholar Charles Glicksberg, in *Whitman and the Civil War*, declared that Barton's book was "marked throughout by a hostile spirit toward Whitman" and discredited Barton's premise that Lincoln was unaware of Whitman's existence. Modern scholars, such as Whitman biographers Gay Wilson Allen and Jerome Loving, and David Herbert Donald, who wrote books on both Herndon and Lincoln, likewise have accepted Rankin's story in spite of Reverend Barton.

One of the points that authenticate Rankin's account is his dating of Lincoln's encounter with *Leaves of Grass*. Only in that year, two years after the first publication of Whitman's poems in 1855, would the ex-Congressman and future President Lincoln have had the freedom and inclination to study such a literary curiosity. Only in 1857 could the reading of Whitman have produced such an impact on his oratory.

 The Poems of
LEAVES OF GRASS,
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR,
May be ordered at any Book-Store or Newspaper Depot,
or especially of
FOWLER & WELLS, 308 Broadway, New York.
Their place of business is the principal Agency for the Work,
wholesale and retail. A note written to them, giving the writer's
address, and enclosing \$1 00, will procure a bound copy, post-paid,
by return mail.
They supply Booksellers at a liberal discount.
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Any communication by mail, for the author of *Leaves of  
Grass*, can be directed to him, namely,  
**WALT WHITMAN, care of**  
**FOWLER & WELLS, 308 Broadway, New York.**

Billy Herndon, who knew Lincoln better perhaps than any man in Lincoln's day, said he was the rawest man without vices, but with a flagrant disregard for propriety, "the appropriateness of things." He was so heedless of his appearance that he forgot to comb his coarse black hair. He cared so little about his clothing that sometimes he wouldn't wear this piece or that. After all, he was raised on a farm.

Kentucky, barefoot. “He never could see the harm in wearing a sack-coat instead of a swallowtail to an evening party, nor could he realize the offense of telling a vulgar yarn if a preacher happened to be present.”

Abraham Lincoln was, therefore, the last man in Illinois who would have dismissed Walt Whitman’s verse on the grounds of its being vulgar or unseemly. Lincoln had a single-minded interest in the truth. Herndon wrote: “No lurking illusion or other error, false in itself and clad for the moment in robes of splendor, ever passed undetected or unchallenged over the threshold of his mind . . . He threw his whole mental light around the object, and, after a time, substance and quality stood apart, form and color took their appropriate places, and all was clear and exact in his mind . . . He crushed the unreal, the inexact, the hollow, and the sham.”

Whitman’s Adamic nakedness in itself would have appealed to the lawyer’s “perfect mental lens.” Lincoln’s favorite author was not Shakespeare, Burns, or Byron, though he loved them all. It was the Greek geometer Euclid; Herndon marveled during their circuit-riding days how Lincoln could lie awake concentrating until 2:00 A.M., memorizing the propositions of Euclid by candlelight while the other lawyers snored in the hotel room. The Greek formed Lincoln’s style of debate. Now Lincoln was searching for a still center of the turning world of human nature, a diamond-hard pivot on which he might set his compass to draw the circle of an American civilization. “I am the poet of commonsense and the demonstrable and of immortality,” said Whitman. “Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so, / Only what nobody denies is so.”

The new world ideal appeared in *Leaves of Grass*, this naked poet, this “body electric.” Whitman boldly identified not only with every other human being—black, white, or red; slave or master—but with every atom of the universe, in every moment of history since Creation, and with God Himself. The poet had even distinguished between the accidents of his birth, upbringing, and present circumstances, and the essential man that underlay all those trappings.

*Trippers and askers surround me,  
People I meet—the effect upon me of my early life, of the ward and  
city I live in, of the nation,  
The latest news, discoveries, inventions . . .  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, work, compliments, dues,  
. . .  
. . . loss or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,  
They come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.  
Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary . . .  
. . .  
I believe in you, my soul—the other I am must not abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.*

Lincoln never completely overcame his embarrassment over his humble origins, particularly the

question of his mother's illegitimacy. This fueled his ambition even as it colored his abiding melancholy. Now came this personification of democracy, this unencumbered, free-spirited poet demonstrating to him the soul's liberty from breeding and class. Everything in Whitman's philosophy and point of view appealed to Lincoln's powers of reason, passion for democracy, vigilant conscience, and what Herndon called "his intense veneration of the true and the good."

In Lincoln's study the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* had fallen upon rich and fertile ground. Whether Lincoln read all 384 pages of the book is uncertain. But the poetry of Whitman Lincoln did read left its mark upon him in 1857. In that transitional year a change came over Lincoln. The change is evident in his speeches, an alteration in idiom that has never been thoroughly explained. Lincoln's early successes in debating, in the courtroom, and "on the stump"—campaigning for himself or his colleagues—resulted from his spellbinding powers as a storyteller and his mastery of logic and demonstration and analysis. The "rail-splitter" was a firstclass logic-chopper. Again Herndon bears witness: "He reasoned from well-chosen principles with such clearness, force, and directness that the tallest intellects in the land bowed to him. He was the strongest man I ever saw, looking at him from the elevated standpoint of reason and logic."

Here is an excerpt from an early speech protesting the repeal of the Missouri Compromise:

*Equal justice to the south, it is said, requires us to consent to the extending of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore you must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the negro, I wish to ask whether you of the south yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much? It is kindly provided that of all those who come into the world, only a small percentage are natural tyrants. The percentage is no larger in the slave States than in the free. The great majority, south as well as north, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain.*

The combination of wit, common sense, and juridical reasoning is practically irresistible. Yet for all his passion for truth and justice, for all the folksy humor of Lincoln's early speeches, and his exceptional powers of persuasion, we can find nothing in the first thousand pages of Lincoln's prose we can call sublime—little that we can rightly call literature. His discourse is the analytic, clear medium of an advocate, leavened by barnyard metaphors, tall tales, biblical parables, and fables modeled upon Aesop.

One can begin to see the change coming in 1854, as Lincoln lashed out against the Kansas-Nebraska Act sponsored by Senator Stephen A. Douglas. This act, permitting settlers in new territories to decide for themselves for or against slavery, spelled the "end of the Missouri Compromise," which for thirty-four years had banned slavery above latitude 36°30'. Lincoln was grudgingly tolerant of slavery as a necessary evil—where it already existed—but he fiercely opposed the extension of the peculiar institution in the West, which the new law would make inevitable.

The speeches he gave that year in Bloomington, Springfield, and Peoria, dismantling Douglas's arguments for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, are models of classical rhetoric invigorated by Lincoln's belief that the new law was unjust. In their way, these talks are quite convincing. Yet they do not seize

the imagination; they do not resonate. Like his stump speeches for the free-soil presidential candidate John Frémont, these were not rousing, for all their righteous indignation. Lincoln had learned to draw up a clear demonstration of a just principle, and the slavery controversy had motivated him. But he had yet to develop that lyric eloquence for which he is now remembered.

It would take a touch of the poet to move Abraham Lincoln's oratory from the cold light of rhetoric into the warm iridescence of dramatic literature, with its multicolored rays, its distinct shadings. He had it in him. In his youth he wanted to be a poet. He was familiar with Edgar Allan Poe's poetry, and memorized "The Raven," as well as many verses of Oliver Wendell Holmes. He admired the poem "Mortality," by the Scot William Knox, and also got it by heart.

*'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath,  
From the blossoms of health, to the paleness of death.  
From the gilded saloon, to the bier and the shroud.  
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud!*

He wrote to a friend, in 1846, "I would give all I am worth, and go in debt, to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is."

As late as 1846 Lincoln was writing skillful imitations of Augustan English poetry, showing the influence of Thomas Gray.

*As distant mountains please the eye,  
When twilight chases day—  
As bugle-tones, that, passing by  
In distance die away—*

*As leaving some grand water-fall  
We ling'ring list its roar,  
So memory will hallow all  
We've known, but know no more.*

These verses and others were inspired by a visit in 1844 to his childhood home in Perry County, Indiana, where his mother and sister were buried. During that visit he saw his old schoolmate Matthew Gentry, who, "At the age of nineteen . . . unaccountably became furiously mad, from which condition he gradually settled down into harmless insanity." Lincoln wrote of him:

*But here's an object more of dread*



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